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ABSTRACT

Consulting can give college writing instructors the opportunity to teach in a radically new environment. The conditions under which writing is taught in-house for business and industry are not as highly structured as they are in academia, and, in fact, point up the distinction between training and education. Training, focused on singular and narrow goals, is considered appropriate for situations in which businesses want to improve the task performance of their employees. On the other hand, businesses see education as a general means of employee development, with multiple goals and many potential applications. Results of national surveys indicate that organizations commonly identify letters and memos as the documents with which they most want help, and grammar, organization, and writing anxiety as the most immediate problems confronting their employees. In responding to these needs, consultant-developed writing programs should start with training in editing to provide clients with fairly quick results and thus establish consultant credibility. Attention should next be given to organization and such features as audience and purpose, where clients can begin to see a need to expand rather than just focus awareness. At the end of such workshops, the clients should be able to transfer these writing skills to their own letters and memos. (HOD)

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Opportunities for Consultants

One kind of consulting that college writing instructors do is teach non-credit writing courses in-house for business, industry, and government. I want to focus on this form of consulting because it is so like what most of us have as a primary academic duty, teaching, and a comparison of the two settings in which we might teach writing--academe and the world of work--is instructive. Of course, teachers of technical and business writing should consult in order to gain experience in their field. But even teachers of strictly academic forms of writing would find it worthwhile to consult, and in doing it would gain more than money and mere exposure to the world of work.

If you have already had consulting experience, what I have to present may not tell you much. If you have not had consulting experience, maybe what I tell you will convince you that you should. I have one warning, though. Do not infer from the title that I am going to talk about economic opportunity. I am not presenting opportunity in the sense of a "lead" to a lucrative consulting contract. I will talk about the opportunity to learn how to do better what we are supposed to do--that is, teach. Consulting gives us the opportunity to teach in a radically new environment; and as such it gives us the opportunity to learn more about teaching.

TEACHING IN THE ACADEMIC SETTING

We take the academic setting so much for granted that sometimes we are unaware of its existence, just as we are sometimes unaware of the air we breath. So in setting up this comparison, let us first review the structural features of our home base, the traditional classroom:

CS 209 856

1. In the academic setting, placement tests and prerequisites help insure that we are working with groups of students whose skills and background are relatively homogeneous.

2. We have a fairly sizeable chunk of time at our disposal. For a three-hour semester course, we have forty to forty-five contact hours, and assuming the Carnegie hour, another eighty to ninety hours outside of class. This time is usually spaced out conveniently over fifteen weeks. At the beginning of the course we feel that we have plenty of time to introduce ourselves, to hand out syllabi, to discuss our requirements, to get to know the students, to tell our jokes, and to attend to other more or less important matters.

3. In the traditional classroom, we count on regular attendance. While students may cut our classes, we take it as aberrant behavior, and we have the power to require attendance. In short, we plan on their being there, even if they aren't.

4. As the instructor, we hold the power to assign a final grade. Even though we may take this power for granted--indeed, even forget that it is our "ace in the hole"--it is one of our most powerful tools. Even if all else fails, students will listen to us because they must have the passing grade in order to get credit for the course.

5. We are not alone in what we do. We are part of a faculty that is making similar assumptions and similar demands of students. Furthermore, we have as backup extensive educational facilities that include a library, students services, a registrar to handle record keeping, a dean of students to handle discipline problems, and, in many cases, even tutorial help.

6. We know that our students are tied into an economic system that requires them to gain marketable skills and that they are part of a social system that confers prestige for attaining a college degree.

7. We have in mind some notion about the value of education in shaping the entire student. We sometimes see ourselves as participating in a curriculum, working toward a significant educational mission.

8. We assume that our students understand the democracy of the classroom. That is, all students are equal participants in the class, and all are judged and responded to on the quality of their work. Most of us actively promote such values.

We could add more to this list, but these make the point. I've bunched them together to give you an overwhelming reminder that we pursue teaching in higher education in a highly structured environment. While some of these features are not especially benign, they are nonetheless there providing continuity for what we do. But the major point is this: as an in-house consultant you have precious little of this structure to help you out.

TEACHING IN THE IN-HOUSE SETTING

Let us, then, consider the conditions under which you may teach in-house writing for business and industry:

1. Homogeneity. I hope you encounter classes of similar abilities when you consult, but rarely have I taught an on-the-job course with anything near the homogeneity that I find on campus. The typical in-house class that I have taught is a general writing skills workshop, and employers I've worked for have never tried to group people of comparable abilities. They are not homogeneous groups of students; they are heterogeneous groups of clients.

Note, too, that job rank doesn't necessarily have anything to do with writing ability. I've found shipping clerks whose writing skills are excellent, and top managers who can't handle the simplest of writing tasks.

2. Time. You don't have as much time as you have on campus. The in-house course usually comes out of company time--that is, paid time--and management is understandably reluctant to give up too much of it. The largest chunk of time that I have had available is twenty contact hours spread over five weeks, with no allowance for "homework." The shortest session I've done lasted one hour. Let me note that my experience isn't much different from the national averages. In reporting on the types of in-house writing classes that are presented nationally, L. C. Denton reports that the typical in-house course "averaged 16.5 contact hours, ranging from 4 to 35 hours, with 12 being the most commonly reported number. The typical course meets twice a week for 2-hour sessions and runs for 4 weeks" (10).

3. Attendance. Employees will miss class in order to carry out their job responsibilities. They do not consider that cutting, and we shouldn't view it as aberrant behavior. They may ask for any handouts they missed, but they do not necessarily feel that they should "make up the work."

4. Grades. We do not hold a final grade over our on-the-job participants. I'm not suggesting that we should make them work for a grade--I'm just observing that we can't.

5. When we consult we are the faculty, not part of the faculty. This is one of the reasons why I like to team teach when consulting. The back up is comforting. Furthermore, we can't send participants to the library, or the dean, or to a tutorial facility. You'll usually have to bring the library with you, and you'll do the tutoring if it is going to be done. Organizations

I've worked for have typically been generous in secretarial support for duplicating and the like. However, you must do by it their schedule, and trying to get a last minute handout duplicated may cause complications.

6. Reasons for attending. Participants do not necessarily gain prestige by attending the session. They may see you as getting in the way of their pressing duties. We have to prove our value as soon as we can, which means helping them with their writing as soon as possible.

7. The educational mission. The in-house class may have little interest in your global observations and comments concerning what way Western man. They have not brought you their values to be reshaped. Probably we should stick to what we can tell them about writing.

8. Democracy of the classroom. If the boss is sitting in the class, what he says will carry more weight than what the shipping clerk says. In a class with mixed ranks, you may note inhibited discussion.

Looking at the in-house setting with the eyes of academicians we may at first see only disadvantages. Actually, though, for the teaching of writing there is at least one clear advantage. If your clients must write on the job, they are keenly aware of the need for good writing skills. If you can show them that you can help them they will be the best students you have ever had.

However, the features of the in-house setting dictate directness in our approach. We should immediately show our audience that we can help them write better, we should remain focused on their writing needs, we should present discrete units of learning that will stand by themselves, we should have exercises that participants at different skill levels can respond to, and we should emphasize learning by doing.

In teaching in-house writing programs, it is useful to keep in mind the distinction between the types of teaching that business and industry recognize: training vs. education. The features of training and education are not mutually exclusive, but for ease of definition I'll present them first as a dichotomy. Training is considered appropriate for situations in which the business wants to improve the performance of the employees in the tasks that are part of their present job. It is directly focused on singular skills and has narrow goals (Nadler 40-42).

On the other hand, business sees education as a general means of employee development. Education has multiple goals, and many potential applications. It is seen as a "releasing experience" that will lead to many forms of new behavior. Personnel officers see education as having a role in preparing employees for new positions within the organization, positions requiring new behavior (Nadler 60-65).

In short, we can characterize training as directed, closed, practical, applied, measurable, and linear. Education is open-ended, liberal, theoretical, difficult to measure, and non-linear.

Employers that I've dealt with usually have no technical awareness of this distinction. But they know what they want, and usually they want the outcomes of training rather than education. Perhaps it is easier for them to identify with the apparent clarity of training than with the not readily apparent value of education. Whatever, I think the preference that business and industry have for training poses problems for college writing teachers.

In answering the question, do we in the university setting train writers, or do we educate them? most of us would probably answer that we do both. We know that there are some linear sorts of things we do in the teaching of

writing, and there are some non-linear sorts of things. While some teachers feel more or less comfortable with one or the other, it is finally a mixture of the two that makes for the effective teaching of writing. While we might argue that writing is always a combination of the two, we know that there are cases when one predominates over the other. For example, I find that the teaching of punctuation to otherwise literate students is linear and, as such, is probably a form of training. Heuristics, on the other hand, is non-linear, and, as such, closer to the endeavors of education. But despite this mixture in the teaching of writing, most of us probably consider ourselves educators. We train, yes, but that training has a subordinate position in our role as educators.

But before becoming hard and fast on how we'll deal with the in-house class, let's consider what business and industry most commonly ask for.

WHAT DO BUSINESSES WANT?

National surveys indicate that organizations are remarkably singular in what they want in an in-house writing course. Companies commonly identify letters and memos as the documents they want help with (Barnum and Fischer 10; Stine and Skarzenski), and they identify grammar, organizing, and anxiety about writing as the most immediate problems their employees have (Aldrich 128; Barnum and Fischer; Sharplin, Birdsong, and Sharplin). But these terms are only a beginning in understanding what organizations want. Often they are without enough knowledge of writing to accurately describe what their problems really are. For example, the organizations I've personally dealt with typically say they want grammar. But never do they mean grammar as the scientifc study of the rules of language. What they usually want is correct

writing, in whatever form correctness takes. "Bad grammar" is used variously to describe vague diction, faulty punctuation, lack of clarity, lack of focus, wordiness, lack of purpose, incorrect margins, and sometimes lack of subject-verb agreement. I've consistently worked with people who believe that "good grammar" means clear, readable writing. (For a discussion of the meanings of the term grammar, see Hartwell.)

Inefficient organization comes much closer, I believe, to what is often really wrong with the writing that I see in business and industry. Writers often start with little sense of purpose, importance, or need. Often they do no planning because they don't know how to plan. They translate their confusion into a confused piece of writing--and often an awkward piece of writing as well. That is, I think the so-called grammatical problems often grow out of problems in organizing. Furthermore, I think the inability to organize is part of the anxiety that some employees have about writing.

As a pair, using correct grammar and organizing make an interesting opposition. In an otherwise literate person, the grammatical issues can be approached with training. Organizing could to some degree also be approached with training, but given that organization often has to do with the awareness of invisible structures, it is often more in the realm of education. These affiliations suggest a strategy that we might take in approaching the in-house course of short duration.

Given the need in an in-house course for a quick start, and that seemingly omnipresent demand for "good grammar," I've found it useful to start programs with training in editing. When using the stylistic approaches of Joseph M. Williams and Richard A. Lanham, I can talk about something that sounds like grammar, but is also directly useful in untangling awkward

sentences. Most clients get fairly quick results, and that helps establish credibility. I can do a workshop with examples to edit, then send them home with a handout that outlines a few basic editing approaches. Work outside class is not crucial, so the participants could do it or not.

Building on the credibility gained in the editing exercises, I move on to organization, which I first approach by strategy. The most useful strategies that I've found for organizing letters and memos are the A-plan, B-plan, and C-plan approaches that Wilkinson, Clarke, and Wilkinson outline in their text, Communicating through Letters and Reports. The approach is linear and direct and most clients I've had have been able to grasp the principles readily. When credibility is established here, I go on to features such as audience and purpose, where we see the beginnings of a need to expand awareness rather than just focus awareness. Issues such as audience and purpose start to touch on invisible thought structures, and thus carry us into non-linear concepts. At this point I can start using their letters and memos for workshop activities.

If I have more time yet, I can move on to other ways of thinking about organization--by format, by persuasive need, and so on--and can deal with hierarchical thinking and the role it plays in organization. But at this point we are deep into educating, and some participants may become uncomfortable. That's why I find it useful to conclude in-class programs with a return to editing, but on an expanded level. Workshop activities can include editing the sentences as well as revising the structure.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN?

Any teacher of applied writing sees the pragmatic advantages of consulting: 1.) We gain a better sense of the workplace to which our students

are headed, 2.) We may make contacts that may be useful in placing our students. 3.) We gain access to in-house documents. While companies may not want to give them to strangers, they may give them to a consultant who has gained their trust. These documents help introduce relevancy into our academic courses, and they help us in our own research. But when all is said and done, there are other ways to gain these pragmatic advantages.

So the unique advantage is the opportunity to teach an entirely different population, one that has direct needs for writing skills. And what I've learned is how to use the precious little time available to put together an effective program. Planning a consulting program requires more orchestrating that I was used to. I have became more aware of using the appropriate strategy at the appropriate time. And somewhere along the line it occurred to me that this same efficiency wouldn't be out of place in the academic classroom. Why not give our students the same security of training that we give our clients? I agree with Victoria M. Winkler and Jeanne L. Mizuno that it is not our job to become corporate trainers in our academic classes (47). On the other hand, we should not be reluctant to use the techniques of training when they are called for, and at times they surely are.

On the other hand, is there something from the academic world that we can take to the in-house class? After all, the company has had the good sense to hire somebody who knows something about writing instead of simply calling in the full-time trainer-consultant who is ready to do everything from seminars on interpersonal communication to workshops on budgeting. There are time when it doesn't hurt to let businesses know that we are also professors and that our commitment to what we do is deep, genuine, and total. When education is

appropriate, we should do it--we have no right to insult the intelligence of our audience.

Marlene Fine, for example, reports using free-writing with corporate clients to help them overcome writer's block (12). Free-writing is strange enough to our undergraduates, so we might be leery of using it in a pragmatic setting. But if it works, then it too is pragmatic. It doesn't hurt us to keep our eyes open for these kinds of applications, and what we can take from the academic world to the world of work we should. What we do in one enriches what we do in the other.

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